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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the diagnostic label assigned to a child (emotionally disturbed--ED, learning disabled--LD) and the type of behavior exhibited by that child was investigated with 128 special education graduate students. Ss were asked to complete one of four randomly assigned case studies in which the label assigned to the child and/or the type of behavior exhibited by the child had been manipulated. Four label and behavior conditions were simulated and analyzed. Results suggested that label-inappropriate behavior (e.g., LD child with ED behavior) was more disturbing and less accepted than label-appropriate behavior (e.g., ED child with ED behavior). Implications for teacher training and ecological intervention were discussed. (Author/CL)

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Research Report No. 4

AN ANALYSIS OF THE DISTURBINGNESS AND ACCEPTABILITY OF BEHAVIORS AS A FUNCTION OF DIAGNOSTIC LABEL

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IRLD

Institute for Research on Learning Disabilities

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I. Adequacy of Norm-Referenced Data for Prediction of Success

II. Computer Simulation Research on the Assessment/Decision-making/Intervention Process

III. Comparative Research on Children Labeled LD and Children Failing Academically but not Labeled LD

IV. Surveys on In-the-Field Assessment, Decision Making, and Intervention

V. Ethological Research on Placement Team Decision Making

VI. Bias Following Assessment

VII. Reliability and Validity of Formative Evaluation Procedures

VIII. Data-Utilization Systems in Instructional Programming

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March 1979

Abstract

Behaviors typically exhibited by children are differentially disturbing to individuals who work with those children. The relationship between the diagnostic label assigned to a child and type of behavior exhibited by that child was investigated in this study. A group of advanced undergraduate students was asked to complete one of four randomly assigned case studies in which the label assigned to the child and/or the type of behavior exhibited by the child had been manipulated. The hypothetical child was said to be either emotionally disturbed (ED) or learning disabled (LD) and his case study contained behaviors characteristic of emotionally disturbed or learning disabled children. Four label and behavior conditions were simulated and analyzed. Analysis of results suggested that label-non-appropriate behavior (e.g., LD child with ED behavior) was more disturbing and less accepted than label-appropriate behavior (e.g., ED child with ED behavior). Implications of the study were discussed with regard to teacher training practices and ecological intervention.

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An Analysis of the Disturbingness and Acceptability of Behaviors as a Function of Diagnostic Level

Ecological theorists have suggested that an individual's behavior may be a source of "disturbance" within an ecosystem (Rhodes, 1967, 1970). Within this context, behaviors as well as individuals' reactions to those behaviors are important. The relative "disturbingness" of behaviors which are thought to be characteristic of emotional disturbance and learning disabilities has been investigated; differences in reactions to these behaviors have been demonstrated (Mooney & Algozzine, 1978). Differential responses to the "disturbingness" of behavior may be the result of a variety of factors within the respondent (e.g., age, or teaching experiences) or they may result from expectations generated by the behavior.

Stimulus qualities of an individual (e.g., attractiveness) have also been shown to be differentially influential in interpersonal interactions (Algozzine & Salvia, 1976; Dusek, 1976). Labels (e.g., normal or emotionally disturbed) can be thought of as stimulus qualities which can affect interpersonal relationships. Recent literature has shown that the "learning disabilities" label generates negative expectations when compared with the "normal" label (Foster, Schmidt, & Sabatino, 1976), and differentially negative expectations when compared to other labels in special education (Foster & Ysseldyke, 1976).

Similar results have been demonstrated for the "emotionally disturbed" label. Foster, Ysseldyke, and Reese (1975) measured expectations

for a "normal" and "emotionally disturbed" child in a hypothetical situation and in response to a videotaped presentation in which a normal child was presented as "disturbed" or "normal." They concluded that the "emotionally disturbed" label produced negative effects under both conditions. "Emotionally disturbed" children were perceived as negatively as "learning disabled" children, less negatively than "educable mentally retarded" children and more negatively than "normal" children in a study by Foster and Ysseldyke (1976).

This investigation was designed to study the effects of labels and label-appropriate or label-non-appropriate behavior on individuals' attitudes toward the disturbingness and acceptability of that behavior. It was hypothesized that tolerance, as measured by ratings of disturbingness and acceptability of behavior, would be a function of the label associated with the child thought to exhibit the behavior. A graphic representation of the model underlying this hypothesis is presented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Several continua are presented. One indicates that a variety of labels (e.g., normal, learning disabled) are available, each representing a degree of difference from each other. The continua of disturbingness and acceptance reflect possible reactions of individuals to characteristic behaviors which may be represented within the matrix. "Normal" conveys expectations and tolerances for behavior within certain limits. When an individual's behavior is within those limits (A'), it should be accepted, not disturbing, and tolerated. When

the behavior is beyond the limits (B), it will likely generate negative consequences (i.e., be disturbing and less acceptable) and may become cause for concern and/or intervention. "Learning disabled" also conveys certain expectations and limits; in fact, it has been shown to be more similar to "normal" than different from it (Myklebust & Boshes, 1969) and representative of a condition between normalcy and emotional disturbance (McCarthy & Paraskevopoulos, 1969). Some behaviors exhibited by learning disabled youngsters are characteristically similar to behaviors of normal children (i.e., bounded by implied limit "a") and other behaviors are thought to be characteristically "LD" (i.e., beyond implied limit "a"). When a behavior (B), characteristic of a more deviant condition (B'), is exhibited by a normal child, it should be more disturbing. The individual who exhibits that behavior is likely to be referred to by the label representative of that condition (i.e., learning disabled). When the behavior exhibited is characteristic of its own condition (B') it should be acceptable and tolerated more than when it is characteristic of another condition. Some behaviors (e.g., underachievement) should be characteristic of "LD" and "ED" (B_1), while others should differentiate emotional disturbance from learning disability (C') as a category (e.g., aggressive, disruptive behavior).

This model for interpretation suggests that if behavior is outside of the limits (implied or accepted) for a condition (C), it will be viewed as more disturbing and less acceptable than if it is within the limits of the behavior acceptable for a condition (B', B_1, C').

The purpose of this study was to simulate four of the possible

label-behavior combinations within the model (B', C, B_1, C') and to analyze their effects; for example, a "learning disabled" child exhibiting learning disabled behaviors (B') was compared with a "learning disabled" child exhibiting emotionally disturbed behaviors (C). It was hypothesized that when the behavior was clearly in the unacceptable range (C), it would be rated as less acceptable and more disturbing than when the same behavior was exhibited in the accepted range (C').

Procedure

Subjects

One hundred and twenty-eight undergraduate students enrolled in two special education courses at The Pennsylvania State University participated in this study. All of the subjects had taken introductory courses in special education, were familiar with accepted characteristics of exceptional children, and had participated in a variety of practicum experiences.

Method

Each of the subjects was asked to complete one of four randomly assigned case studies: two labels (LD, ED) and two characteristic behavior samples (ED, LD) were manipulated. The behavioral dimensions were comprised of behavior samples and descriptive phrases typically thought to be characteristic of learning disabled or emotionally disturbed children (Lerner, 1976; Reinert, 1976). For example, the case study included a "Behavior Rating Scale" section. "Destructiveness," "fighting," and "negativism" were rated as "severe problems" for the

ED child and "distractibility," "impulsivity," and "short attention span" were rated as "severe problems" in the LD case study. Other indications of perceptual and behavioral problems were also interchanged within the categorical labels to simulate the four conditions of interest (i.e., two label-appropriate behavior and two label-non-appropriate behavior case studies).

The dependent variable required the subjects to respond to the relative "disturbingness" and "acceptability" of the behavior exhibited by the child in the case study. Specifically, they were asked to indicate "how disturbing the behavior would be in working with the child" and "how accepting they would be of the behavior in that child." The responses were recorded on 5-point scales from "not very disturbing/accepting" to "very disturbing/accepting"; these points were thought to be representative of the continua of "disturbingness" and "acceptance" necessary for this study. Dependent data were analyzed as a two-factor between-subjects analysis of variance design with 32 subjects in each cell. The level of rejection was set at .05 and an additional criterion of at least a 0.5 unit difference was imposed for significance of obtained differences.

Results

The means, standard deviations, and analysis of variance summary table for the "disturbingness" criterion are presented in Table 1. A significant ($p < .05$) label by behavior interaction is indicated. Follow-up procedures indicated that the "emotionally disturbed" behavior was more disturbing when it was thought to be exhibited by a learning disabled child than when it was thought to be the behavior

of an emotionally disturbed youngster. Individuals were more bothered by disruptive, aggressive behavior when it was thought to be the behavior of a learning disabled child; they were also more "accepting" of that same behavior when it was thought to be exhibited by an emotionally disturbed child.

Insert Table 1 about here

Means, standard deviations, and analysis of variance summary table for the "acceptance" criterion are presented in Table 2. A significant ($p < .05$) label by behavior interaction is again indicated. Follow-up analysis results were similar to those obtained for the "disturbingness" criterion; ED behavior was less accepted when it was thought to be exhibited by a learning disabled child, than when thought to be the behavior of an emotionally disturbed child. In the analyses, LD behavior was moderately disturbing or acceptable but not differentially influential with regard to the type of child who was thought to have exhibited it. All follow-up results are presented in Table 3.

Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here

Discussion

The major hypothesis of this study was supported; that is, behavior characteristic of an emotionally disturbed child was rated as more disturbing when it was thought to be exhibited by an LD child than when it was thought to be exhibited by an ED child. Behaviors characteristic of learning disabled youngsters (i.e., hyperactivity, short

attention span) were rated as moderately disturbing to teachers-in-training whether they were thought to be exhibited by an LD child or by an ED child. Aggressive, disruptive, disobedient behavior (i.e., behavior characteristic of emotionally disturbed children) was differentially influential depending upon the label assigned to the child thought to exhibit the behavior. If it was thought to be the behavior of an LD child, it was more disturbing than if it was thought to be exhibited by an ED child. Parallel results were indicated when the teachers-in-training were asked to respond to "how accepting" they would be of the child's behavior; that is, they were moderately accepting of learning disabled behavior regardless of label and more accepting of emotionally disturbed behavior when it was thought to be the behavior of an ED child.

The generalizability of these findings is limited by two factors. The selection of undergraduate students as subjects does not permit interpretation of the results with regard to ratings of other individuals nor did the simulated case study approach enable real-life tolerances to be investigated. These limitations seem endurable, however, in light of the basic purpose of this investigation; that is, in testing an interpretative model for the relationship between labels and characteristic behaviors, the procedures were viewed as appropriate.

Conclusions

A model for interpretation of label-appropriate and label non-appropriate behavior was presented and four of the label-behavior combinations within this model were tested. The results suggested that

when behavior was outside the implied or accepted limits for a condition (C), that behavior was seen as more disturbing and less acceptable than when the behavior was within its appropriate condition (C').

A variety of behaviors and child characteristics (i.e., stimulus qualities) exist which can affect interpersonal relationships. Traditionally, these characteristics or assigned conditions (e.g., emotional disturbance) have been thought to exist within the individual and thereby be cause for concern or intervention. This research suggests that the responses of other individuals to the stimulus qualities are equally as important. Labels may be convenient reference points which serve as indicators for "acceptances" and "tolerances" for behavior; additionally, discrete categories may exist, to a large degree, as a result of the behavior exhibited and its effects on others.

The implications of this study suggest that labels may generate restrictive tolerances for "acceptable" behavior. An individual bearing a label is expected to behave in a characteristic fashion. A homeostatic balance is achieved when behaviors and expectations are matched and imbalances (disturbances) occur when behaviors are beyond tolerated limits. This implies that some of the characteristic "disturbances" or "disabilities" thought to exist in children may, in fact, be the result of disturbances in the interface between the child's behavior and other individuals' attitudes (expectations) toward that behavior.

Teacher training programs must begin to acknowledge that biases generated by categorical labels and behavior characteristics can have detrimental effects on the perceptions of individuals who will later be working with children. The amelioration of these effects should be a

primary emphasis within the research community as well as professional training programs.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Analysis of Variance Summary Table for "Disturbingness" Criterion

Label	Behavior	
	Emotionally Disturbed	Learning Disabled
Learning Disabled	$\bar{X}$ = 3.2	$\bar{X}$ = 2.8
	s = 0.8	s = 0.8
Emotionally Disturbed	$\bar{X}$ = 2.7	$\bar{X}$ = 3.0
	s = 1.0	s = 0.7

Source	MS	df	F
Between Subjects			
Label	0.50	1	.658
Behavior	0.13	1	.171
Label X Behavior	3.78	1	4.973[a]
Error	0.76	124	

[a]significant at .05 level

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Analysis of Variance

Summary Table for "Acceptance" Criterion

Label	Behavior	
	Emotionally Disturbed	Learning Disabled
Learning Disabled	$\bar{X} = 2.9$	$\bar{X} = 3.3$
	$s = 0.7$	$s = 0.8$
Emotionally Disturbed	$\bar{X} = 3.5$	$\bar{X} = 3.2$
	$s = 0.7$	$s = 0.9$

Source	MS	df	F
Between Subjects			
Label	2.00	1	3.03[a]
Behavior	0.13	1	0.20
Label X Behavior	4.50	1	6.82[a]
Error	0.66	124	

[a] significant at .05 level

Table 3

Results of Follow-Up Procedures for Significant Label by Behavior Interactions

	Comparisons			
	ED-ED (C')[a]	LD-LD (B')[a]	ED-LD (B_1)[a]	LD-ED (C)[a]
Disturbing[b]	2.7	2.8	3.0	3.2
Accepting[b]	3.5	3.3	3.2	2.9

[a]Label by behavior combinations as suggested by model.

[b]Obtained differences are significant at .05 level and also meet 0.5 unit difference criterion which was imposed.

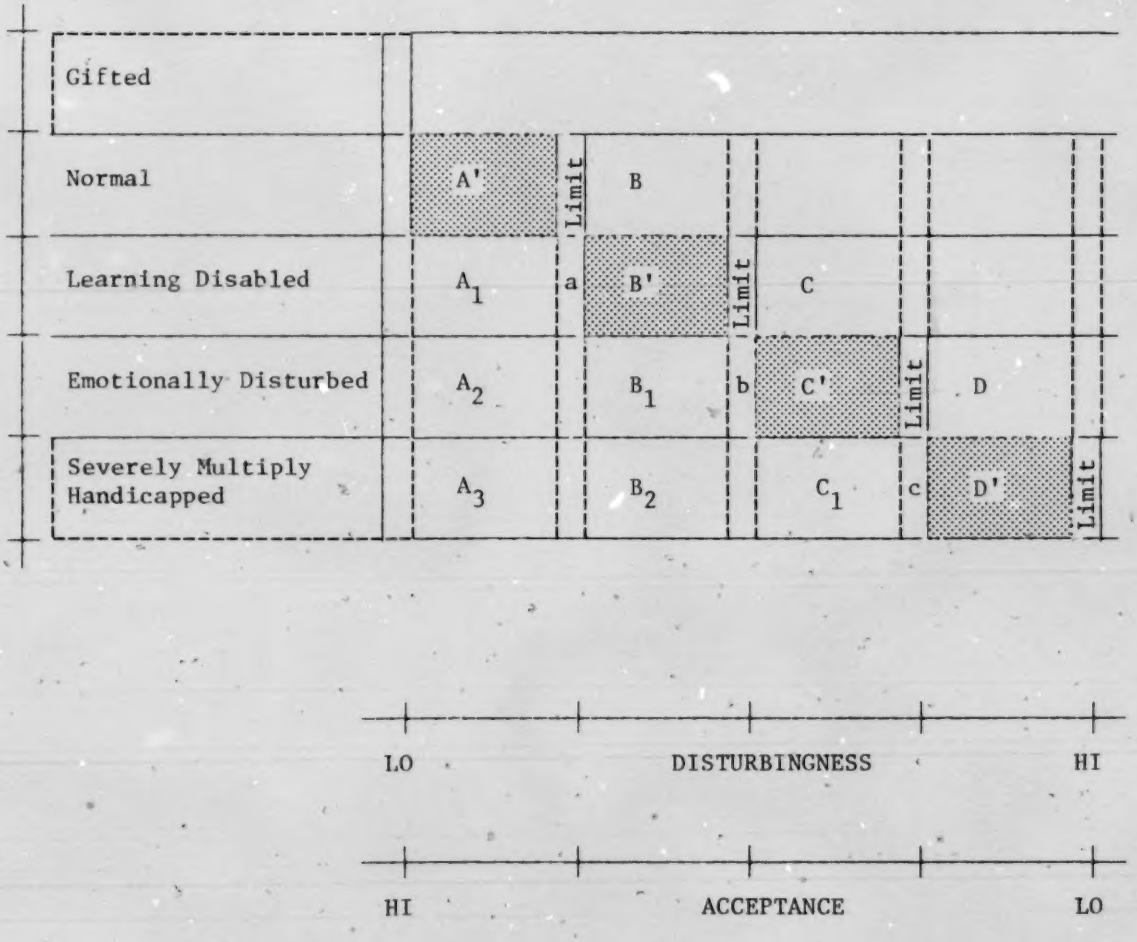

Figure 1. Tolerance and Disturbingness of Behavior As a Function of Label.

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